



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations

## Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition

FSN Forum



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IN BRIEF

# Rural migration, agriculture and rural development

### About this brief

This FSN Forum brief is based on the September–October 2017 online discussion *Rural migration, agriculture and rural development*, facilitated by Andrea Cattaneo of FAO. Participants in 28 countries commented on the draft annotated outline of the 2018 edition of *The State of Food and Agriculture (SOFA)*, which addresses rural migration and its challenges to food security and agricultural production. See the discussion at: [www.fao.org/fsnforum/activities/discussions/SOFA\\_migration](http://www.fao.org/fsnforum/activities/discussions/SOFA_migration)

### OVERVIEW

Migration is on the rise and it is one of the more widely-debated topics in the development community. There is a growing focus on the causes and impacts of migration and the best ways to address the needs of affected communities and individuals.

While migration has long been part of a wider process of development and structural transformation, migrants often feel they have no choice but to leave home, due to poverty or other harsh conditions. Despite the focus on international migration, most migrants move within their home countries. In 2017, international migration reached an estimated 258 million people, but domestic migration involved 763 million.

### RURAL MIGRATION

Rural migration, in which people move to or from cities and between rural areas, is of particular interest to FAO in its focus on fighting hunger, achieving food security and promoting the sustainable use of natural resources. The debate over rural migration recognizes the complex relationship between migration, agriculture and rural development.

Unfavorable conditions for agricultural activity and off-farm employment can drive people to engage in distress migration which, in turn, can adversely affect the communities they leave behind. To be effective, policymaking must take a holistic view of both the positive and negative drivers and impacts of migration, seek out more data on migration and encourage broader consensus on the definitions of commonly-used terms such as *migrant, rural and urban*.

## MIGRATION DRIVERS

Migration decisions are frequently driven by extreme poverty and food insecurity, but these conditions are influenced by a range of more specific factors, including:

- ▶ the lack of employment, lack of access to social protection, natural-resource depletion, climate-related challenges and conflict situations;
- ▶ the lack of access to infrastructure and services, such as health care and schooling;
- ▶ the demand, often international, for seasonal laborers, female domestic workers and migrant fishers;
- ▶ inadequate national agricultural policy.

## RURAL IMPACT

While migration can lead to benefits for rural communities, rural migration also raises the following concerns:

- ▶ Rural-to-urban migration can lead to significant shortages in agricultural labor.
- ▶ Men are most likely to leave agricultural communities in search of employment elsewhere, leaving women and children behind.
- ▶ The risk of child labor can increase sharply and with it, the threats to children's health, safety and development.
- ▶ Rural migrants often face food insecurity and poverty after migrating and are not able to contribute economically to their communities of origin.

## URBAN CHALLENGES

Rural migration can also pose challenges for urban areas, both for migrants and their new communities.

- ▶ Cities can experience uncontrolled growth, illegal settlements and higher unemployment.
- ▶ Migrant conditions can deteriorate, leading to food insecurity, poverty, lack of health services and stress.
- ▶ Migrant workers are frequently exploited.
- ▶ Migrant children are at greater risk of interrupted schooling and child labor.
- ▶ Migration can lead to social tensions in host communities.

## MIGRATION BENEFITS

Under the best of circumstances, migration leads to mutually-beneficial relationships between migrants and host communities:

- ▶ Rural migration results in a flow of remittances towards those who are left behind, providing extra sources of income to reduce poverty and hunger.

- ▶ Migration towards cities reduces the stress on natural resources in some rural areas.
- ▶ At destination, migrants provide a labor force and different skills and knowledge.
- ▶ Skills and other benefits gained in a destination community can be applied in the migrant's place of origin in the form of investments, technology transfers, know-how and social networks.

## POLICYMAKING CONSIDERATIONS

Effective policymaking can help to reduce the factors which lead people to leave rural communities and, at the same time, increase the benefits of migration, both in communities of origin and destination.

- ▶ Reducing the exodus from rural areas requires a "human development" perspective, in which migrants are not seen only as agents of labor within the agri-food system but also as individuals with capacities, aspirations and expectations.
- ▶ A broader view of rural migration should consider how food security is affected by such factors as land rights, healthcare, off-farm employment alternatives, and the welfare of women and children.
- ▶ Policymaking can help rural residents to make the most of remittances sent back to rural areas by migrants.
- ▶ Off-farm rural employment could be increased through the development of "smart villages," rural centers which offer some of the opportunities and services found in urban areas.

## MIGRANTS – 3 CASES

- ▶ In Colombia, rural-to-urban displacement caused by years of armed conflict negatively affected agri-food production. Peasants began to return to their land under a formal peace process.
- ▶ In the European Union, fishing vessel owners employ high proportions of "non-local" and non-EU migrant crewmembers. There has been a move to use international agreements to protect migrant fishers from exploitative labor practices.
- ▶ In Thailand, youth migrants have used high-tech tools and social media to inform their home villages about development projects which could have a major impact on agriculture and forestry. They have helped to secure the customary rights of rural peoples over forests and wetlands, which are vital sources of food.

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